

Emilio Isgrò, *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 1*, 1969.

PRESS RELEASE  
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## EMILIO ISGRÒ

8 February – 8 April 2017

*I don't consider myself a painter, but rather a poet who writes with images.* — Emilio Isgrò, 1985

*Deletion calls into question the survival of the human word. [...] We have been fed such a rich array of words that in the end we no longer read them. But if they are taken from us for a moment, then once again we rediscover their full force and artistic power.* — Emilio Isgrò, 2016

TORNABUONI ART LONDON

7 FEBRUARY 2017 - Preview

(5:30 - 6:30 pm) Panel discussion with Marco Bazzini and Mathieu Copeland in the presence of the artist

(6:30 - 8:30 pm) Private view

Tornabuoni Art London is pleased to announce the first UK retrospective of Italian artist Emilio Isgrò (b. 1937). One of the great innovators of the artistic language in post-war Italy, Isgrò offers a different perspective on the country's artistic panorama to what has been shown in the UK before. Tornabuoni is taking this opportunity to broaden its focus beyond the Spatialist and Arte Povera avant-gardes and consider the role of one of the main proponents of Visual Poetry and precursor of international conceptual art since the early 1960s.

As befits the London chapter of this retrospective travelling between Milan, London and Paris, the show will open with the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, whose 24 volumes Isgrò deleted in 1969. This installation, monumental by its size and undertaking, was presented by Tornabuoni at Art Basel Unlimited 2016 and epitomises the artist's trademark deletion technique, with which he painstakingly strikes through text and image by hand with India ink.

Isgrò realised his first *Cancellature* (Deletions) in 1964 and was met with scandal and disapproval by the public. Since

then, however, there has been growing interest in the artist's work, as demonstrated most recently by the Palazzo Reale retrospective in Milan in 2016 and by the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, which has recently acquired three of his works and will be exhibiting them from Spring 2017. While his work evokes historic iconoclastic practices and more recent acts of censorship and misinformation, Isgrò nonetheless regards his deletions as a creative endeavour rather than a destructive one. Indeed rather than desecrating knowledge and works of art, Isgrò's "purpose [is] not to destroy the word, but to preserve it by interrupting its communication by the mass media through which they are emptied of meaning and significance." By deleting the words on a page, Isgrò aims to call attention to their meaning, unshackling them from grammatical and social conventions to liberate their many potential meanings.

Over time, the artist's simple gesture was transferred onto telex, maps, sheet music, newspapers and photographs – as many variations in a complex pictorial universe of pictures, installations and performances. From the *Telex* of the early 1970s, as well as works of Visual Poetry, to more recent pieces where the black marks have abandoned the pages of writing to lay themselves upon maps and famous images from the history of art and culture, Tornabuoni visitors will be able to experience the power of Isgrò's deletions. As the curator, critic and Director of Castello di Rivoli, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev has written, 'Only for Isgrò does deletion become poetic (even when he is not deleting), thus giving life to the whole work.'

Always true to his literary roots, Isgrò focuses on words and ethics, as well as the issues of globalisation and the debate around the Mediterranean culture of exchange and of origins, as exemplified by his works on nature. From his paintings with insects, to the *Cartografie* (Maps) displayed at Tornabuoni Art London, the themes tackled by the Sicilian artist in his work also form a reflection on culture and history, displaying an ability to comment on our times without ever falling into the mundane.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a new scholarly catalogue published by Forma Edizioni and edited by Marco Bazzini, with texts by Luca Massimo Barbero, Andrea Bellini, Michele Bonuomo, Mathieu Copeland and the artist himself. The volume will retrace Isgrò's artistic career and provide a deeper understanding of the themes that lie at the core of the artist's practice.

## NOTES TO EDITORS

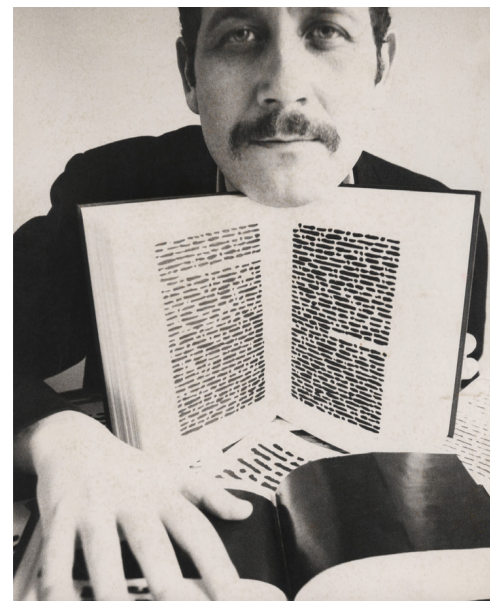
### ABOUT THE ARTIST

A conceptual artist and painter – but also a poet, writer, playwright and director – Emilio Isgrò (Barcellona Pozzo Di Gotto, Sicily, 1937) moved to Milan in 1956. From the start he complemented his artistic production with writings and poetry. That same year he published a collection of poems entitled *Fiere del Sud*.

Isgrò realised his first *Cancellature* (Deletions) in 1964. These consist of books and encyclopaedias whose words are completely covered in black marks, with which he contributes to the birth and development of Visual Poetry and Conceptual Art. In 1966 he released *Dichiarazione 1*, his poetic declaration, during the exhibition at the Galleria Il Tragheto in Venice, where the artist outlined his own personal definition of poetry is the "general art of the sign". At the end of the decade, Isgrò deleted the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1969) and the *Enciclopedia Treccani* (1970) for the Galleria Schwarz in Milan (1970).

In 1972, he was invited to the 36th Venice Biennale, in which he also took part in 1978, 1986 and 1993. In 1977, he won first prize at the 14th Sao Paulo Biennial in Brazil. In 1979, he presented *Chopin*, his installation for 15 pianos, at the Rotonda della Besana in Milan, where sheet music was replaced on each instrument by free-flowing musical notes on a white background, among imagined diary entries.

In the European Year of Music (1985), La Scala in Milan commissioned Isgrò to make the multi-media installation *La veglia di Bach* for the Chiesa di San Carpofo in Milan, where Isgrò imagined through images, the night just before the composer's



Portrait of Emilio Isgrò, 1968.

# tornabuoniArt

death in which, legend has it, he regained his sight.

In 1990, he wrote *Teoria della cancellatura*, a critical text to accompany his exhibition at the Galleria Fonte d'Abisso in Milan. Following group shows at the Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam, 1970) the Finch Museum (New York, 1973) and the Hayward Gallery (London, 1982), Isgrò exhibited at MoMA in New York in 1992 in *The Artist and the Book in Twentieth-Century Italy* and in 1994 at the Peggy Guggenheim Foundation in Venice, in *I libri d'artista italiani del Novecento*.

In 1996, Mondadori published *Oratorio dei Ladri*, a collection of Isgrò's poems. His gigantic *Seme d'arancia* (Orange Seed) was donated to his hometown Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto in Sicily in 1998 as a symbol of social and civil rebirth of Mediterranean countries. In 2001 the City of Palermo put on a sweeping retrospective in the church of Santa Maria dello Spasimo. In 2002 he exhibited at the Galleria Civica d'Arte Contemporanea of Trento and the following year at the Mart in Trento e Rovereto.

In 2008 the Luigi Pecci Centre for Contemporary Art in Prato hosted the vast retrospective *Dichiaro di essere Emilio Isgrò* (I Declare I Am Emilio Isgrò), which was followed in 2013 by the monographic exhibition at the Galleria Nazionale di Arte Moderna in Rome; while in 2015, *Il Seme dell'Altissimo*, a six metre-high orange seed made out of marble welcomed millions of visitors from all over the world to the Expo in Milan.

In 2016, the city of Milan, where the Sicilian artist has been living and working for over fifty years, dedicated a major retrospective in homage to Isgrò across three spaces: the Palazzo Reale, the Gallerie d'Italia and the Casa del Manzoni.

## ABOUT TORNABUONI

Founded in Florence in 1981 by Roberto Casamonti, in the street that gave the gallery its name, Tornabuoni opened other exhibition spaces in Crans-Montana in 1993, Milan in 1995, Forte Dei Marmi in 2004, Paris in 2009 and London in 2015. Specialising in Post-War Italian art, the gallery presents the work of artists such as Fontana, Burri, Castellani, Bonalumi, Boetti, Scheggi and Manzoni. Tornabuoni also has a permanent collection of significant works by major Italian artists of the Novecento, such as de Chirico, Morandi, Balla and Severini, as well as International 20th-century avant-garde masters, such as Picasso, Mirò, Kandinsky, Hartung, Poliakoff, Dubuffet, Lam, Matta, Christo, Wesselmann, Warhol and Basquiat. Complementing its focus on Italian art, the Tornabuoni collection also features the work of young contemporary artists such as the Italian artist Francesca Pasquali and the Italy-based Armenian artist Mikayel Ohanjanyan, who, along with the Armenian pavilion, won the Golden Lion at the 2015 Venice Biennale.

Tornabuoni participates in major international art fairs such as the FIAC in Paris, TEFAF in Maastricht and New York, Art Basel, Art Basel Miami Beach, Art Basel Hong Kong, Artefiera in Bologna, Miart in Milan, Frieze Masters in London, Artgeneve in Geneva and Artmonte-carlo in Monaco.

The gallery also works closely with museums and institutions. With its experience and knowledge of the work of the artists it represents, the gallery has also established itself as an advisor for both private and public collections.

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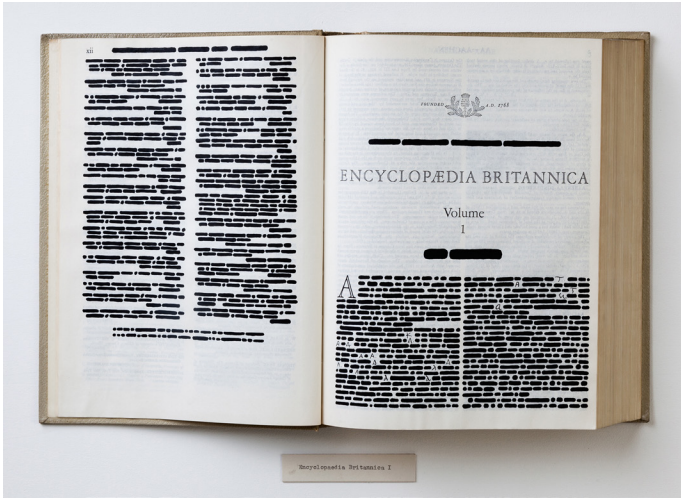
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For more information on the gallery and its activities, visit [www.tornabuoniart.com](http://www.tornabuoniart.com)

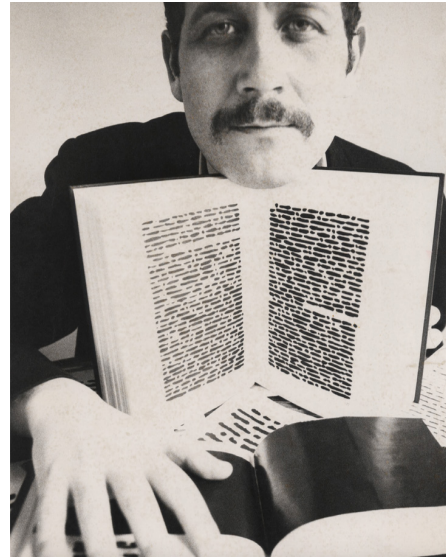
You can follow us on Facebook (@Tornabuoni Art London), Instagram (@tornabuoniLDN) and Twitter (@TornabuoniLDN) with the hashtags #Tornabuoni #Isgrò #EmilioIsgrò

Images: Emilio Isgrò, *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 1*, 1969, India ink on typographic book in wood and plexiglas box, 50 x 75 cm, Courtesy Archivio Emilio Isgrò  
Portrait of Emilio Isgrò, 1968. ©Ferdinando Scienna

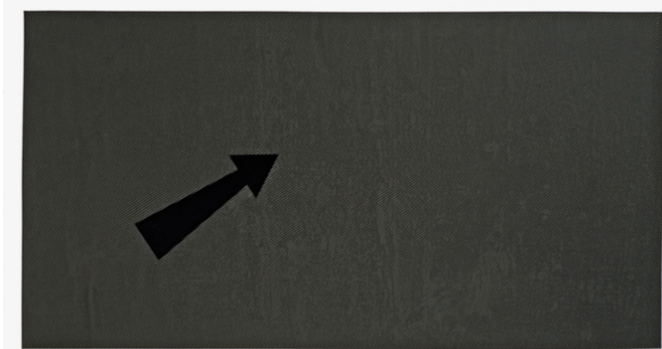
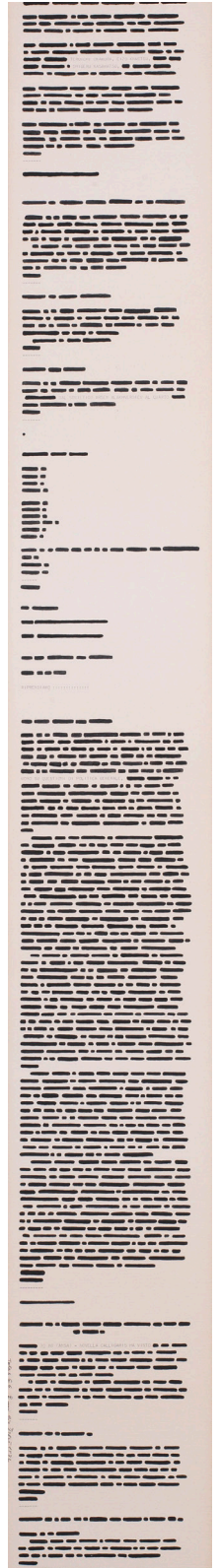
IMAGES AVAILABLE FOR PRESS



Emilio Isgrò, *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 1*, 1969, India ink on typographic book in wood and plexiglas box, 50 x 75 cm. Courtesy Archivio Emilio Isgrò

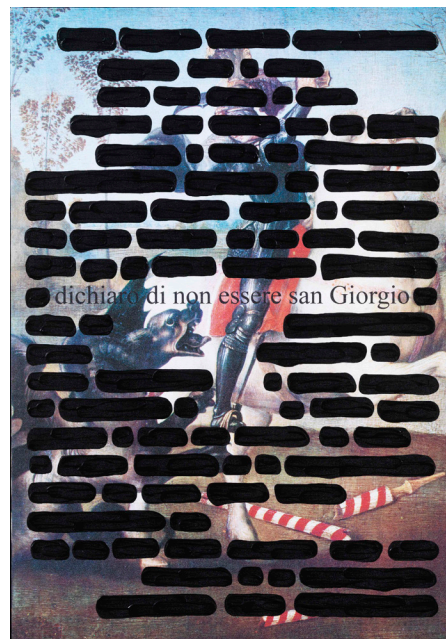


Portrait of Emilio Isgrò, 1968. ©Ferdinando Scienna



**Jacqueline (indicated by the arrow) bends over her dying husband.**

Emilio Isgrò, *Jacqueline*, 1965, emulsified canvas, 61 x 118 cm. Courtesy Archivio Emilio Isgrò



Emilio Isgrò, *Dichiaro di non essere San Giorgio*, 2012, acrylic on canvas on panel, 79 x 56 cm. Courtesy Tornabuoni Art



Emilio Isgrò, *Credo e non credo*, 2010, acrylic on canvas and panel, 70 x 100 cm. Courtesy Tornabuoni Art

Emilio Isgrò, *Telex G 6*, 1972, India ink on telex in plexiglas box, 165 x 21 cm. Courtesy Tornabuoni Art